

Displaying divinity: emperor-worship in the Roman empire

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Tourists in the great city of Ephesus (on the Aegean coast of Turkey) might have found themselves rudely pushed aside by those eager to catch sight – or get out of the way – of an impressive procession of at least 250 priests, young men, and civic officials carrying thirty-one small statues of silver and gold. The parade was instituted in February A.D. 104 following a generous gift of land, money, and bullion from Caius Vibius Salutaris, one of the wealthiest men in Ephesus. Such generosity was magnificently commemorated in a lengthy inscription conspicuously displayed at the southern entrance to the city's great theatre. The inscription, one of the longest surviving from anywhere in the Roman Empire – 568 lines divided into six columns covering nearly sixteen square metres of marble – set out at length Salutaris' various benefactions and recorded their grateful acceptance by his fellow citizens. Even if they could not read the extensive detail, passers-by could still appreciate the impressive scale of this civic monument to Salutaris' munificence.

A mobile history lesson

In his careful regulation of this public parade, Salutaris offered both participants and onlookers a very short introduction to the history of Ephesus. The procession started outside the city at the great Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the world and amongst the wealthiest shrines in the eastern Mediterranean. Ephesus was famous for its worship of Artemis. The goddess, the daughter of Zeus and Leto, had been born in a sacred grove outside the city. Here her mother had found sanctuary, safe from the jealousy of Hera, Zeus' wife. Nine statues of Artemis, eight in silver and one in gold, punctuated the procession; reminders that even in the second century A.D., when Ephesus had long been part of the Roman Empire, it continued to value its close connection with the traditional Greek gods.

The city's ancient history was on display too. Eleven hundred years before Salutaris' benefaction, Ephesus was believed to have been founded by the hero Androclus. In slaying a boar, flushed out by a grass fire started by the upsetting of a frying pan of sizzling fish, Androclus had fulfilled an oracle of Apollo that a city should be established by settlers, 'where a fish shall show them and a wild boar lead the way'. In the early third century B.C., Ephesus was re-founded by Lysimachus, one of the close companions of Alexander the Great. Lysimachus had moved the city to its present site, facing a navigable harbour and well defended by an impressive circuit wall. In Salutaris' benefaction these significant moments in Ephesus' past were commemorated by the inclusion in the parade of silver images of the city's two founders and of Mount Pion, which rose protectively behind the commercial district of Lysimachus' new town and on whose slopes Androclus had once hunted the boar.

In all, the procession took about ninety minutes to complete its circular route, from the Temple of Artemis through the city's main streets and back again. With its 250 celebrants and thirty-one statues, the procession offered a kind of working model of Ephesian society, of the city's divine connections and of its foundation (and re-foundation) long before any Roman conquest. It mattered too that this carefully choreographed *tableau vivant* seamlessly incorporated more recent events. The statue of

Ephesus' town council was preceded by a personification of the Roman Senate and followed (after another of Artemis) by one representing the Roman People. Most importantly, the whole parade was headed by silver statues of the reigning emperor Trajan and his wife Plotina. These shimmering images of Roman rule were linked directly in one long processional chain with both Ephesus' founding fathers and Artemis, its protecting deity.

By celebrating a living emperor as if he were a god, the Ephesians not only acknowledged the supremacy of imperial power but also sought to understand it on their own terms and connect it to more local concerns. As this mobile history lesson processed in slow and stately rhythm through the city's centre, it helped to make coherent sense of Ephesus' place in the Roman Empire. In the Upper Agora, the city's newest quarter, both Trajan and Artemis were carried past temples to the deified Julius Caesar and Augustus; past a colossal imperial statue (four times life-size) housed in a late-first-century shrine dedicated to the 'revered emperors'. Here, above all, the procession suggested that, however far-distant Trajan might be, like other rulers before him, and like Artemis herself, he had a special concern for the city. As emperor, Trajan only visited Ephesus once (briefly in late autumn 113 *en route* to Antioch and the eastern frontier), but its citizens confidently asserted his ever-watchful care. Reaffirming their own importance in the vastness of empire, they paraded Trajan's glittering silver statue through the city's streets, as Salutaris' regulations demanded, once every two weeks.

History made concrete

A generation earlier, two of the wealthiest families in the town of Aphrodisias (about 150 kilometres up country from Ephesus) celebrated their own importance and their city's special relationship with Rome. Together they funded the building of two splendid white marble porticoes dedicated to Aphrodite (in whose honour the town was named) and 'the revered god-emperors'. The porticoes stood three storeys high, facing each other across a broad, marble-paved road about ninety metres long. At one end stood a monumental gateway, at the other, magnificently framed, a temple dedicated to the imperial cult. Columns divided the two upper storeys of each portico into roughly square panels, 190 in all, each decorated with figured sculpture. The middle storey of the north portico carried personifications of the peoples conquered by Augustus. Directly opposite on the south portico were scenes from Greek myth. Above, on the top storey, panels displaying emperors were placed next to those representing traditional Olympian gods.

Here 'real time' and eternity merged. A winged Victory separated panels celebrating Claudius' invasion of Britain in A.D. 43 and Nero's military successes in Armenia in the late 50s. Like the Olympian gods, these Roman emperors were represented as heroic male nudes. A well-muscled Nero supports an exhausted woman, the personification of a conquered Armenia. A stocky Claudius stands triumphantly over a defeated Britannia, pulling her head back by the hair, ready to strike a death blow. Claudius did not always appear so attractive. For the imperial biographer Suetonius, writing in the early second century A.D., Claudius was

a stammering, dribbling, weak-kneed emperor who as a boy was said to have been unfeelingly dismissed by his mother Antonia as not fully human: 'not so much unfinished by nature, as barely begun'.

The sculptures from Aphrodisias present a strikingly different version of a Roman emperor. At the same time as they celebrate Roman victory, they also seek to understand it as part of a cosmic order defined by time-honoured myth and ancient deities. By thinking of emperors as god-like, those in the provinces eased the harsh realities of conquest. Its brutality was dulled by a series of images which argued for a connection between Greek myth and Roman history, between Aphrodisias and Rome and between the Olympian gods and naked Roman emperors. Viewers of this sculptural programme were able to glory in the further advance of the Roman Empire, of which they had long been a part. In this imperial world-view, Aphrodisias would never – like Britannia – lie defeated at the feet of an emperor.

Rome and the West

This basic pattern was repeated time and time again. Far away on the other side of the Mediterranean, leading members of communities in Gaul (modern France) set up inscriptions in honour of such strange deities as Nemausus Augustus, Bormana Augusta, Mars Loucetius Augustus, Augustus Deus Anuallus or the Comedouae Augustae. Odd as these names might at first appear, they are part Gallic, part Roman imperial. Like the presence of Artemis and Trajan in Salutaris' parade in Ephesus, the explicit fusing of ancestral gods and Roman emperors demonstrated how creatively traditional systems of belief understood imperial power and joined it to local concerns.

In the city of Rome, the focus of the imperial cult was firmly on the divinity of deceased emperors. Surrounding the Forum, their imposing temples and monuments dominated the political and religious centre of empire. The earliest temple, dedicated to the deified Julius Caesar, was commissioned by his adopted son Octavian (the future emperor Augustus) in 42 B.C., two years after his father's assassination. Caesar's divinity had been confirmed by the appearance of a comet which signalled the advent of a new god in the heavens. For Octavian, this justified his own evocative self-description as '*diui filius* – son of a God'. In the ensuing civil wars, this startling epithet emphasized his divine favour. It also offered one explanation for his victory. For the defeated Mark Antony, Octavian was 'the youth who owed everything to his name'. Augustus' own divinity was signalled by the release of an eagle from the top of his funeral pyre. At times, such wondrous moments of apotheosis (inasmuch as they could ever be faithfully represented) might require more elaborate imagining. A relief on the base of a column, erected shortly after A.D. 161 to honour the recently deceased emperor Antoninus Pius, showed both the emperor and his wife Faustina (who had died twenty years earlier) carried heavenwards on the back of a splendidly winged youth. Flanked by eagles, they soar high above personifications of the city of Rome.

Modern viewers sometimes stare at such arresting images with blank incredulity. For many, it can be difficult to comprehend a religious system which does not recognise a barrier between humanity and divinity. In the ancient world, these were not clearly defined opposites. What mattered was not so much an individual's nature (as human or divine), but rather his or her status within a blurred spectrum of intermediate possibilities. It can also be difficult to conceive of a society with no firm division between religion and politics. Yet in the Roman Empire, the religious rituals surrounding emperor-worship were not somehow secondary to the 'real business' of rule (administration, justice, taxation, warfare). Rather, religious imagery and religious language were an inseparable part of Roman political vocabulary.

For its enthusiasts, the worship of living emperors and their deification after death offered a means of understanding what it

meant to be part of the Roman Empire. It could connect individuals and communities, whether in Ephesus or Gaul, to a single imperial centre. It could integrate traditional gods and long-standing local beliefs within a ritual framework recognisable across the whole Mediterranean. Above all, it could provide a language for comprehending absolute power. For wealthy men like Caius Vibius Salutaris, supreme in their own communities, to be seen to bow down before another human being would be to risk unthinkable social humiliation; but to worship a god offered local grandees a way of recognising their inferiority without any loss of face. Indeed, in the competition for civic and personal glory, the celebration of a special connection with a superhuman emperor both reinforced the privileged position of those who held priesthods, funded festivals, or paid for the construction of temples, and confirmed the superior status of their cities. A fragmentary list of proverbial questions and answers preserved on a scrap of papyrus from second-century Egypt succinctly sums up such an attractive view of the hierarchies imposed by empire – on both heaven and earth.

What is a god? The exercise of power.

What is a ruler? Like a god.

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When a Roman emperor died, if he was deemed to have been a good emperor and if it was in the interests of his successors to align themselves to him, he underwent apotheosis (i.e. was turned into a god, or was deified). This did not happen over night. Rather there had to be a lavish state funeral, an eagle released into the sky, and someone to say that they had seen his spirit leaving for Olympus. On the basis of this 'evidence' (!), a senatorial decree was issued to say that he was now 'divus', divine. This may all sound odd to us today, especially when we remember that it was not just good emperors that were deified but often other members of their family also. But we should not think the Romans stupid. Whether people believed it or not, they did it – not unlike non-Christians 'doing' Christmas. In short, there were important offices to hold and glories to be gained in being involved in the rituals and buildings associated with the 'imperial cult'.